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ABSTRACT

Eugene Ionesco's play "Rhinoceros" is a paradigm of mindlessness in action, of the bizarre, absurd, and sometimes frightening humor of uncritical thinking. A false or presumed cause is dramatized at the very opening of Act I, the first of a string of fallacies braided throughout all three acts. A standard reading of the play holds that Ionesco's theme is the deadening effect of materialistic bourgeois society. However, it may be more accurate to say that the playwright's concern is with the degeneration of language--distortions and faulty reasonings are heaped up until the comic becomes grotesque and ultimately tragic. The very end of the play returns to the very beginning of logic, the law of identity, and is a perfect ending to lift the audience out of a nearly unintelligible morass of fallacy and obfuscation. (RS)

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Critical Thinking: Ionesco's Rhinoceros and Faulty Reasoning

The definitions of critical thinking and thinking skills could provoke at least a day's argument, and therefore, for the sake of expediency, I'd like to confine this exploration to an examination of one kind of uncritical thinking--- fallacies, or faulty reasoning--- which Eugene Ionesco dramatizes in Rhinoceros. The play is a paradigm of mindlessness in action, of the bizarre, absurd, and sometimes frightening humor of uncritical thinking.

At the very opening of Act I, the Grocer's Wife complains that a passing Housewife gets on her nerves. "Too stuck-up to buy from us nowadays," she reasons, at the very moment that we see this anonymous woman who crosses the stage with a basket of provisions (bought elsewhere) under one arm and a cat under the other. She appears to be more an ordinary and pleasant woman than an arrogant sophisticate as the Grocer's Wife has labeled her. It's a dramatization of a

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false or presumed cause, the first in a string of fallacies braided throughout all three acts.

A few lines later, after the off-stage rhinoceros has been heard, the Logician speaks: "Fear is an irrational thing. It must yield to reason." The oversimplification obviously ignores the existence of reasonable fear.

Berenger, the hero, refuses to jump to conclusions. When asked what he thinks of the rhinoceros, he responds, "Well... nothing... it made a lot of dust..," and the Logician wanders off-stage reciting an oversimplified definition of a syllogism. Berenger's friend, Jean, falsely accuses Berenger of responding to him with paradoxes, the dreaded enemy of logic, and continues the conversation interspersed with preconceptions and distortions. When Berenger sees Daisy and rises abruptly, causing his drink to spill on Jean, Jean immediately misidentifies the cause and attributes the accident to Berenger's drinking; it is a good example of the post hoc fallacy. A few lines later, Jean brags about his strength and, saying he is strong because he isn't riddled with alcohol, slips in a neat little non sequitur, before delivering his cartesian advice to Berenger.

By now the Logician has abused logic sufficiently enough to argue that all cats die, Socrates is dead, and therefore Socrates is a cat, demonstrating the problem of an undistributed middle. The rapid profusion of errors in reasoning and argument accumulate into a hilarious mass of absurdity long before the end of Act I, which closes with a false dilemma, also known as the either/or fallacy, which is

illustrated in the statement "If we punish him, he will improve his behaviour or at least stop what he is doing." The conversation towards the end of the first act is a convoluted argument over whether the rhinoceros is Asiatic or African.

A standard reading of Rhinoceros holds that Ionesco's theme is the deadening effect of materialistic bourgeois society. However, it may be more accurate to point out the playwright's concern with the degeneration of language; distortions and faulty reasonings are heaped up until the comic becomes grotesque and ultimately tragic.

Act II begins with Botard, a former schoolteacher, dragging the red herring of racial prejudice into the argument of whether or not the rhinoceros killed the cat. Dudard relies on hearsay. Botard counters with a reductive fallacy, or oversimplification, by linking two events as if one caused the other directly: "I've no time for priests who do their utmost to get you to church, just to prevent you from working..." Botard evades or begs the question, and concludes that the proliferation of rhinoceroses is treason. After Jean's dehumanization by his own abuse of language and his careless thinking, he too begins to turn into a rhinoceros, and urges Berenger to replace his moral laws with the law of the jungle when he says, in a Darwinian euphemism, "We must get back to primeval integrity." Humanism has become mere sentimentality.

Act III raises the stakes by crossing the threshold into metaphysical questions confounded with more equivocation,

cliche, oversimplification, non sequitur, tautology, innuendo, hasty generalization or stereotyping, contradiction, and rationalizing. Daisy and Berenger argue whether the rhinoceroses are singing and dancing or roaring and stomping. She leaves, and Berenger is alone with his individuality intact but wavering. He looks in the mirror in a dramatic enactment of the first law of thought, the rule of identity---whatever is, is. From that intuitive and fundamental recognition, reflected in the mirror on stage, Berenger sees his own humanity and individuality, and proclaims in the final lines of the play, "I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end. I'm not capitulating!"

It's a perfect ending to lift us out of the nearly unintelligible morass of fallacy and obfuscation, to return us at the very end to the very beginning of logic, the law of identity, our separateness, our oneness.

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